United Nations A/61/94/Add.1

General Assembly

Distr.: General
27 September 2006

Original: English

Sixty-first session
Agenda items 50 and 124

Information and communications technologies for development

Joint Inspection Unit

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit on policies of United Nations system organizations towards the use of open source software for development

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit herewith, for the consideration of the General Assembly, his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Policies of United Nations system organizations towards the use of open source software for development" (JIU/REP/2005/7).

06-54054 (E) 101006

Summary

The report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Policies of United Nations system organizations towards the use of open source software for development" (JIU/REP/2005/7) examines the extent to which open source software can, in the context of applying information and communication technologies, further the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

The comments of the United Nations system organizations on the recommendations provided in the report are presented in the present note. The views of the system have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). In general, CEB members concur with the recommendations put forward in the report and are of the opinion that the report has surveyed the landscape of the many ways in which free and open source software has been deployed in the development arena. However, CEB members also note that the report does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of free and open source software use as compared to other software models, and uses an anecdotal approach to support its findings. While supportive of the main findings, CEB members feel that a more balanced analysis would result in a stronger argument.

I. Introduction

1. The Joint Inspection Unit report entitled "Policies of United Nations system organizations towards the use of open source software for development" represents the second of two reports on the subject of open source software. The main focus of the report is to explore the extent to which the use of free and open source software can foster the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The report provides an overview of the use of free and open source software in a variety of social areas, including e-government, economic development, education and health. In each case, the report provides a brief overview of the benefits of free and open source software in these sectors along with examples of its use. The report goes on to explore the enabling environment required to realize the full value of such software and surveys the related activities of many United Nations system organizations in a development context.

II. General comments

2. CEB members generally support the recommendations contained in the Joint Inspection Unit report, and appreciate the effort of surveying the use of free and open source software across the public sector landscape. They note that, as demonstrated in the report, many United Nations entities already have initiatives related to free and open source software in place, and participate in promoting the software in a development framework. They strongly suggest, however, that governing body support to those initiatives, both through legislative efforts and in resource allocation, will be necessary to further extend their efforts.

3. Organizations note that the report recognized that information technology in general, and free and open source software in particular, has a fundamental role to play in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. They further note that the report rightly describes many preconditions necessary for the successful introduction of any information and communication technology, not just free and open source software. However, they believe that the report misses some of the most critical enabling factors, notably the ability of individuals to actually use the technology. The availability of electricity and telecommunications are some obvious preconditions, however information and communication technologies also require human resources, entrepreneurship and managerial abilities to become indispensable to economic development. While this is true of any software model, organizations believe that a study on free and open source software should have attempted to assess the extent to which that model, as a component of the information and communication technology landscape in a developing economy, provides advantages over other software models.

4. Organizations also note that while they generally agree with the statements made by the Joint Inspection Unit in the report, they stress the importance of assessing software on all of its attributes, including functionality, long-term support, training and documentation. Naturally, any recommendation by the United Nations to a developing country for a specific application would require a formal assessment of the available technology, free and open source software or otherwise, taking into account requirements and objectives.

5. Organizations note that, like section I of the report on open source software in the secretariats (A/60/665), this report fails to provide a balanced assessment of the relative values of free and open source software against other software models. While anecdotal evidence exists to indicate that such software can deliver value, without a rigorous study of the total costs and benefits associated with different models, the issue remains cloudy. Organizations of the system, while supportive in many areas of the use of free and open software where appropriate, maintain that the selection of a particular type of software for any specific project should be based on a variety of factors, including total cost of operation and ownership. They also maintain that this applies in the development context as well as the operational one. Organizations stress that this should not be construed as lack of support for free and open source software activities in development; indeed, organizations fully support these efforts, and many already engage in such activities.

6. Finally, organizations call upon the Joint Inspection Unit to exercise care in its use of terminology. They note that the report frequently refers to "open source software", which is a designation used by a particular advocacy group, the Open Software Initiative. Other advocacy groups utilize different terminology, and therefore many United Nations organizations take a more neutral approach to avoid the appearance of implicit support for one particular group, and refer to "free and open source software".

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

In line with the relevant provisions of the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society Plan of Action related to the possibilities offered by different software models, including proprietary and open source software, the General Assembly should:

(a) Invite Member States to emphasize the role of information and communication technology in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and to better reflect in their Millennium Development Goal-oriented strategies, particularly in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and the Common Country Assessment/United Nations Development Assistance Framework, their information and communication technology requirements including by taking adequately into account the potential of open source software to foster competition and increase freedom of choice and affordability;

(b) Call on the Secretary-General and other executive heads of United Nations system organizations to provide, as appropriate, their full support to Member States opting to develop initiatives for using open source software to reach the Goals.

7. CEB members support both components of this recommendation, but with the caveat that Member States fully understand all the implications of adopting any software solution, free and open source software or otherwise. They note that for many organizations, both in the public and private sector, free and open source software frequently implies software that is available free of charge and therefore does not require any investment. In reality free and open source software can require significant investment to implement on a large scale, especially for expertise

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training and, if necessary, conversion of data. Furthermore, CEB members note that the recommendation makes the assumption, unproven in the minds of many organizations, that free and open source software by itself creates an environment that advances competition or increases affordability. Even though some organizations, notably the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, have studied this issue extensively, a more comprehensive study by the Joint Inspection Unit would have been appreciated by organizations.

Recommendation 2

The General Assembly should encourage Member States to adopt pro-poor policies to foster digital inclusion by:

(a) Promoting access to low-cost hardware and software including those based on open source software;

(b) Increasing awareness among decision makers of the potential of open source software and the availability in many instances of tested and well supported open source software applications;

(c) Fostering capacity-building programmes and providing incentives for ongoing local open source software development and support.

9. CEB members support the spirit of this recommendation in that they encourage activities by Member States that help to bridge the digital divide. CEB members believe that free and open source software can play a role in this endeavour, however the issues as presented in the Joint Inspection Unit report do not clearly articulate the comprehensive value of free and open source software versus any other model of software implementation and ownership. Organizations of the system fully understand that free and open source software can provide relatively low-cost entry into the information and communication technology arena, however the total costs of implementing it are not always fully understood. CEB members, therefore, encourage Member States to adopt rational approaches to software implementation and support, which could include a mix of free and open source software and proprietary software, depending on the need.

Recommendation 3

The Secretary-General and other executive heads of the United Nations system should consider taking as appropriate the following measures:

(a) Increase awareness through (i) a dedicated open source software portal; (ii) a dedicated portal on the Millennium Development Goals or on information and communication technology for development containing information and hyperlinks related to open source software; and (iii) improving the layout of current web sites so as to give better exposure to open source software initiatives relevant to the mandate of their organization;

(b) Develop software applications under open source software licences whenever possible and make them readily accessible online to various stakeholders;

(c) Provide support to Member States' pro-poor policies geared at promoting digital inclusion through affordable access to hardware and

software, including by making available low-cost computers and refurbished personal computers running on open source software applications.

9. CEB members generally support the points contained within recommendation 3 to the extent that these coincide with their mandates. Organizations note that software development is not the main function of United Nations organizations, and where these activities take place, they do so in order to address specific operational requirements that do not readily lend themselves to wide distribution. Moreover, the decisions related to software development consider a range of factors, including, where possible, free and open source software as an option. However, organizations generally agree that when appropriate and possible, software developed using free and open source software by organizations of the system can and should be shared, and as the report notes, organizations agree that they should do whatever they can to promote these efforts.

Recommendation 4

In the framework of initiatives related to Goal 8 of the Millennium Development Goals, the General Assembly should:

(a) **Call on the donor community to include or maintain in its official development assistance programmes adequate funding for poverty reduction projects based on open source software;**

(b) **Request the Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chairman of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), to consider all appropriate steps that members of CEB could take to allow United Nations system organizations to better serve as catalysts for multi-stakeholder partnerships involving different open source software role players, including private sector enterprises and civil society organizations.**

10. CEB members support this recommendation to the extent that it coincides with their mandates. Many organizations of the system, as noted in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, already participate in multi-stakeholder activities that support increased awareness and use of information and communication technology to enhance their development activities, many of which include free and open source software initiatives.